On Campus with Max Shulman

(Author of "Barefoot Boy With Cheek," etc.)

FOOTBALL THROUGH THE AGES

The football frenzy is upon us. But let us, in the midst of this pandemonium, call time. Let us pause for a moment of tranquil reflection. What is this game called football? What is its history? Its origins? Its traditions? These are not idle questions, for when we have the answers we will appreciate even more fully, enjoy even more deeply, this great American game of football.

First of all, to call football an American game is somewhat misleading. True, the game is now played almost exclusively in America, but it comes to us from a land far away and a civilization long dead.

Football was first played in ancient Rome. Introduced by Julius Caesar, it became one of the most popular Roman sports by the time of Nero's reign. The eminent historian Sigafoos reports a crowd of MMCLDDXVIII people at the Colosseum one Saturday afternoon to see the Christians play the Lions.

With the decline of the Roman empire football fell into disuse. The barbaric Huns and Goths preferred carnata. However, by the Twelfth Century A.D. football had emerged from its twilight and risen to its rightful place in the firmament of European pastimes. The eminent historian Sigafoos reports that the whole continent was in the grip of wild excitement in the year 1102 when the Crusaders, under Freddie Barbarossa, journeyed all the way to Damascus to play the Saracens in the Fig Bowl game. The Crusaders squeaked through, 23 to 21, on a field goal by Dick Coeur de Lion in the closing seconds of the game.

October 21, 1512, will ever remain a red letter day in the history of football. On that day Leonardo da Vinci, who has often been called "The Renaissance Man" because of his proficiency in a hundred arts and sciences, was painting a picture of a Florentine lady named Mona Lisa Schultz. "Listen, Mona baby," he said as she struck a pose for her portrait, "I keep telling you—don't smile. Just relax and look natural."

"But I'm not smiling," she replied.

"Well, what do you call it?" he said.

"Gee, I don't know," said Mrs. Schultz. "It's just an expression, kind of."

"Well, cut it out," said The Renaissance Man.

"I'll try," she promised.

And try she did, but without success, for a moment later the artist was saying to her, "Look, Mona kid, I'm not gonna ask you again. Wipe that silly grin off your face."

"Honest to goodness, The Renaissance Man," said she to him, "it's no grin. It's just the way I look."

"Well, just stop it," said Leonard testily and turned away to mix his pigments.

When he turned back to Mona Lisa and saw the smile still on her face, he became so enraged that he seized the nearest object—a cassava melon, as it happened—and hurled it at her with all his strength. Showing great presence of mind, she caught the melon and ran with it from the studio until The Renaissance Man's temper should cool.

This was, of course, the first completed forward pass.

Another date dear to the hearts of all football fans is September 29, 1442. It was on this date, according to the eminent historian Sigafoos, that a sixteen year old lad named Christopher Columbus tried out for the football team at Genoa Tech. He failed to make the team because he was too light. (He weighed at that time only 12 pounds.)

And why, you ask, is this date—September 29, 1442—so dear to the hearts of all football fans? Because young Columbus was so heartbroken at not making the team that he ran away to sea. And if that hadn't happened, he never would have discovered America. And if Columbus hadn't discovered America, the world never would have discovered tobacco. And if the world hadn't discovered tobacco, football fans never would have discovered Philip Morris—which, as every fan knows, is the perfect companion to football. As Sigafoos, the eminent historian, says, "Land's sakes, I can't even imagine football without Philip Morris. I'd sooner go to a game without my raccoon coat than without my neat, rich tobacco-brown snap-open pack of mild vintage Philip Morris Cigarettes which come in regular or king-size at prices young and old can afford. Land's sakes!"

The end of football in Europe came with the notorious "Black Sox Scandal" of 1887, in which Ed Machiavelli, one of the Pisa mob, paid off the University of Heidelberg Sabres to throw the championship game to the Chartres A. and M. Gophers. It was a mortal blow to football on the continent.

But the game took hold in the American colonies and thrived as it had never thrived before. Which brings us to another date that remains evergreen in the hearts of football lovers: December 16, 1771.

On that date a British packet loaded with tea sailed into Boston harbor. The colonies had long been smarting under the English king's tax on tea. "Taxation without representation," they called it, and feelings ran high.

When on December 16, 1771, the British ship docked at Boston, a semi-pro football team called the Nonpareil Tigers, coached by Samuel (Swifty) Adams, was scrimmaging near the harbor. "Come, lads," cried Swifty, seeing the ship. "Let's dump the tea in the ocean!"

With many a laugh and cheer the Nonpareil Tigers followed Swifty aboard and proceeded to dump the cargo overboard in a wild, disorganized and abandoned manner. "Here now!" called Swifty sharply. "That's no way to dump tea overboard. Let's get into some kind of formation."

And that, fans, is how the "T" formation was born.

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Column No. 2. (330 lines—175 x 2)
College Papers—Fall, 1954

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Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/xycv0004